

Tories in Manchester

I am not ceding any ground to Jeremy Corbyn. I will fight the next election'

**Conservative Party Conference**



Interview

By Ben Riley-Smith
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In an exclusive interview with *The Sunday Telegraph*, the Prime Minister sets out her stall for Britain's future

Theresa May's second conference as Tory leader was meant to be a celebration – a moment for cheers from the party faithful after routing Jeremy Corbyn at the ballot box. Instead, the Prime Minister heads to Manchester without her Tory majority, dependent on another party to stay in power and dogged by leadership speculation. Four months after the snap election that changed everything, the Prime Minister has begun to identify what went wrong. In an exclusive interview with *The Sunday Telegraph*, Mrs May critiques her campaign and vows to win back the trust of Tory activists who spent days knocking on doors last June. She has an uncompromising message for Conservative rebels on manoeuvres in the Westminster shadows – “I’m here to stay.”

Election mistakes

Looking back on a tumultuous election from her office in Number 10, the Mrs May thinks she knows where things went awry. It is clear that Mrs May – a Tory activist who for more than 40 years rose up the traditional way through council politics – acutely feels her party's pain. “I first started stuffing envelopes for the party in my teens,” she says. “I recognise the work that goes into any election campaign.” Can she win back their trust? “Yes,” she says without hesitation. “What I see in the party is a real determination for the Government to get on with the job.”

Comrade Corbyn

Part of that job is taking on the “21st century socialism” being touted by Mr Corbyn, the Labour leader. The 68-year-old is riding high up unexpectedly picking up the seats at the election thanks to a surge of young voters. Three times more 18-to-24-year-olds backed him than Mrs May. The Prime Minister, who herself turns 61 today, sees their two parties locked in an ideological battle over the importance of free markets. “I didn’t see much of the Labour

get across during the election. I think that is one of the key issues that came out of the campaign.” Who is to blame is less clear – though indicators point to campaign HQ constraining her election messages. The result was Mr Corbyn owning the change agenda. It is not a mistake Mrs May intends to repeat. At least two framed copies of her Downing Street speech hang in Number 10 – one outside her office, another where visitors wait – and this week’s conference announcements will spin out of the text.

Mea Culpa

Manchester’s gathering is the first time Mrs May can address the Tory faithful personally after the election – a moment demanding empathy as well as resolve. Bad blood was easy to find over the summer, with activists frustrated at pounding the pavements for an unnecessary election that returned 22 fewer Tory seats. Asked for her message to them, Mrs May offers an apology of sorts, not least to colleagues who lost their seats. “I recognise there were so many of our activists up and down the country I saw when I was going around campaigning – who were out there working really hard for a good result.”

“You look at results in some individual seats where people got figures of votes that they’ve never had before. [But] sometimes there were candidates who still didn’t quite get the seat, sometimes it was Members of Parliament who lost their seats. “I’m sorry that we lost a lot of good colleagues during the election. It wasn’t the result I wanted, I hoped for or was working for. It is clear that Mrs May – a Tory activist who for more than 40 years rose up the traditional way through council politics – acutely feels her party's pain. “I first started stuffing envelopes for the party in my teens,” she says. “I recognise the work that goes into any election campaign.” Can she win back their trust? “Yes,” she says without hesitation. “What I see in the party is a real determination for the Government to get on with the job.”

Party conference but I’ve obviously heard the messages they were giving. You are going to see quite a contrast this week,” she says. “It’s a contrast between a Labour Party that just keeps on promising people without knowing how they’re going to pay for everything ... and a Conservative Party that understands the importance of a balanced approach to our economy.” With that as the backdrop, the Prime Minister today outlines her pitch to win back younger voters: freezing tuition fees, raising the wage level for paying back student loans and ordering a wider review of the system, plus £10bn of help to get people on the housing ladder. The move comes with political risk. Will Mrs May not be accused of pinching Labour’s clothes, given a promise to scrap tuition fees was at the heart of their election manifesto? She disagrees: “Let’s look at what Labour did. They made a lot of promises to students in the election, some of which they rode back on after the election. They gave the impression they were going to abolish debt, then made it clear that wasn’t what they were going to be doing. “We had

Well May you ask Prime Minister's questions

- Last book you read?**
Maigret and the Man on the Bench by Georges Simenon

Last thing you watched on TV?
Strictly Coming Dancing, Debbie McGee is a constituent.

Last song that got stuck in your head?
Queen of the Night from The Magic Flute.
- 

Last memorable meal?
A nice Italian for our wedding anniversary.

Last enjoyable walk?
An RSPB reserve in North Wales.



recognised the issue of young people's concerns. But what I'm doing and what this conference will do is show how we want to deliver on addressing those concerns. I'm not ceding any ground to Jeremy Corbyn.”

Brexit deal

Yet for all the focus on domestic reform, there is one issue that looms large over her premiership: Brexit. The clock is ticking – to coin a phrase favoured by EU negotiators – on the country's departure date of March 2019. The Prime Minister attempted to break the deadlock in talks last month by proposing a two-year transition, but her Florence intervention has had mixed results. EU leaders have welcomed the

change in tone but refused to sign off discussing a trade deal, something the UK wants to happen in October. She remains optimistic – there has “been progress” in talks this week, she says – but not all of her backbenchers believe Brussels will play ball. How seriously is she preparing for the possibility of “no deal”? “Obviously we’re working to get a good deal, we’re working to get the right deal for the UK. But we are making preparations for all eventualities and that includes for no deal,” she replies. “It was in my speech – but perhaps it got a little lost because there was so much in my speech – but I did say we are making the preparations for all eventualities.” Pushed for details, Mrs May says government departments are making plans, but goes little further.

Terms of transition

The new battle line in the Tories’ tussle over Europe is the terms of the transition period. Mrs May’s proposal – for the changes of Brexit to be phased in between March 2019 and “around” March 2021, avoiding a “cliff edge” for businesses – splits opinion. Many Tories accept the need for gradual changes – Mrs May calls it an “implementation” period – but some are uncomfortable with the specifics of a two-year wait. The Prime Minister is categorical over claims it amounts to long-grassing Brexit. “It’s not delaying EU exit in all but name,” she says. “We will exit the EU in March 2019.” But after sustained grilling, she does shed more light on how the phase will work. First,

I am not a quitter, Theresa May in her personal office in Downing Street

Britain is not demanding the right to sign trade deals during the period. She wants to be able to negotiate them, but when asked repeatedly about signing before 2021 says only: “That is an aspect of the agreement that we still have to discuss.” Secondly, she indicates there will be no limits on the number of EU migrants coming to Britain during the transition. They will have to register before entering – a change from now – but asked whether migration numbers will fall before 2021, Mrs May says: “People will be free to come to the UK.” If that disappoints some Tory Eurosceptics, they will be cheered by another comment – that Britain could ignore some EU rules and regulations during the transition. Mrs May plays



Theresa May arrives in Manchester with her husband Philip ahead of the 2017 party conference

nise that there is a concern for people around the financing aspect of this, so we will look again at this area.” The second announcement is on housing. An extra £10billion will be put into the Help to Buy “equity loan scheme”, under which the Government lends 20 per cent of the cost of a new home. It is thought 135,000 new buyers will benefit. The drive will help the Tories hit their pledge to build a million new homes by 2020 and a further 500,000 by 2022. Currently just around 150,000 are built every year. Philip Hammond, Chancellor of the Exchequer, said: “This government understands that for many people finding a deposit is still a very big hurdle.” He added: “Making progress as a nation means supporting young people and families to achieve their dreams of home ownership.”

up the importance of protecting British business but pushed on whether the country could “diverge” from the EU before 2021 – meaning adopting different rules and regulations from Brussels in some areas – she says “yes”.

Leadership plans

Eventually, as Mrs May outlines her plans for the future, it becomes impossible to avoid the blond-haired elephant in the room: Boris Johnson. The Foreign Secretary recently sent a shockwave through Westminster by publishing a 4,200-word Brexit essay – unauthorised by Number 10 – in the pages of *The Daily Telegraph*. The piece touched on everything from NHS reform to the state of Britain’s tax system, fuelling speculation he could be on leadership manoeuvres – fervently denied by the man himself. What was Mrs May’s reaction? She carefully tiptoes around the question: “I think what is important for me is that the Government is united in the vision that we have of the future partnership with the EU, of the negotiating position that we had in this week that was outlined in my Florence speech.”

Is any Cabinet minister unsackable? “Now that’s the sort of question,” Mrs May begins, before trailing off. “Actually I think I’ve answered that question before,” she adds. (She has, back in July. The answer was no.) For critics, this is a crucial point. The Prime Minister is so politically weakened after losing the Tory

majority, they argue, that she cannot afford to sack the big Cabinet names – and therefore collective responsibility is undermined as they appear free to voice their opinions. Mrs May dismisses the argument. “I think probably if you look back in the records of newspapers you’ll see that cabinet ministers giving different views is not something that only has happened in the last year and a half, that it’s actually happened before,” she says. “What matters is not that. What matters is what the government comes together and does. “That’s what matters to the voters,

‘I’m sorry that we lost a lot of good colleagues. It wasn’t the result I wanted, I hoped for or was working for’

that’s what matters to the public: are you delivering on the issues that they think are of real importance to them?” Mrs May’s message is similarly uncompromising to the few dozen Tory rebels angling for her to step aside in March 2019 once Britain is formally out of the EU. “I’m not a quitter, I’m in it for the long term and I believe there is a long-term job to do,” she says, before adding: “I will fight the next election.”

Donald Trump

If she is to make it to the 2022 vote and steer Britain’s path beyond the EU, Mrs May’s relationship with Donald Trump will be crucial.

The Prime Minister was the first foreign leader to visit the American President, flying to Washington DC with the offer of a state visit within days of his inauguration. The trip was born from a strategic decision by her closest aides – that Mr Trump valued loyalty and building a rapport with him was the best way to influence policy. But does this week’s news of the United States slapping sanctions on Bombardier, a Canadian firm that employs more than 4,000 people in Northern Ireland, not reveal our powerlessness? “No,” says Mrs May. “Obviously the issue of Bombardier is one I’ve raised with President Trump on a number of occasions. I did it last week in person in the meeting I had with him in the margins of the UN General Assembly. But this is a preliminary judgement that’s come out from the Department of Commerce.” The Prime Minister also points to Nato – where she elicited a “100 per cent” commitment from Mr Trump on her US visit – and hopes to have a similar impact over North Korea. She nods to America’s stance that “nothing is off the table” but makes clear that for Britain the focus is “continuing to put diplomatic international pressure” on Kim Jong-un and his rogue state. And with that, the interview comes to a close. There is one final task – the photographs. Dressed in Tory blue and posing by a grand Downing Street door, Mrs May’s message to colleagues and conference seems clear – “I’m going nowhere.”

Conference agenda

Raising the Ruth
One of the first speakers when the conference gets under way today will be Ruth Davidson, the Scottish Conservative leader, who along with Boris Johnson is one of the favourites to succeed Mrs May as Tory leader. She is due to address the party on “strengthening the Union between all our citizens” on Sunday afternoon.

Jacob’s leader?
Jacob Rees-Mogg will be hard to miss as he steps up to give no fewer than nine speeches in 48 hours to the party faithful, addressing fringe events on everything from Brexit and the Conservative Party to the importance of free markets and the resurgence of the hard-Left.

Big hitters
Tomorrow, Philip Hammond, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, will explain how he plans to “build a strong economy”, but the highlights of the week are expected to be on Tuesday when a raft of big-hitters take to the podium. Amber Rudd, the Home Secretary, will start



the day at 10am, focusing on how to “fight injustices”. Later, David Davis, the Brexit Secretary, will discuss securing the best EU exit deal, followed by one of the most eagerly anticipated speeches of the conference when Mr Johnson, the Foreign Secretary, takes the stand. It follows his calls last night for the Brexit transition to last “not a second more” than two years. **Prime time**
The grand finale will see Theresa May take centre stage and close the conference on Wednesday in a speech entitled “Building a country that works for everyone”.



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Tories to help young people on student fees and housing

Continued from Page 1
with the job of delivering for them,” she said. Mrs May dismissed claims that Mr Johnson’s Brexit comments – not least the 4,200-word unauthorised article in *The Daily Telegraph* last month – amounted to a breakdown in Cabinet collective responsibility. “I think probably if you look back in the records of newspapers you’ll see that Cabinet ministers giving different

views is not something that only has happened in the last year and a half, that it’s actually happened before,” she said. The Prime Minister also says “sorry” to Tory colleagues who lost their seats as a result of her decision to hold a snap election and vowed to rebuild trust with activists. To get on the front foot, Mrs May has two announcements designed to show that her premiership will not only be

defined by Brexit. The first concerns tuition fees. The Tories have promised to freeze fees, meaning a planned rise with inflation from £9,250 to £9,500 will not go ahead. They will also raise the level of earnings at which graduates start paying back their student debt from £21,000 to £25,000, saving £360 a year in repayments for almost a million graduates. However, it will only benefit people

who left university after 2012, when the fees were raised close to the current levels. There will also be a wider review of the system – and that could bring more radical changes. Cutting fees, slashing interest rates on debt and bringing back grants for poorer students are all being considered – but scrapping fees, capping the number of university places and introducing a new “graduate tax” will not go on the agenda.

Explaining the decision, Mrs May said she understood the concerns over mounting student debt and admitted that tuition fees had failed to bring the variety hoped. “We’ve got a system which when the changes on finance and funding were introduced we all expected to see some diversity in the system – two-year degrees, differential fees, that sort of thing. That hasn’t happened,” she said. Mrs May added: “Obviously I recog-



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